

# A Megalithic Circle at Taipo Kau, New Territories, Hong Kong

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THIS article recounts the discovery and subsequent excavation of a small megalithic circle—only about nine ft. in diameter, consisting of nine or ten stones surrounding a central menhir—which had been buried under a mound. Very little has been found bearing on its culture or date, but some parallel structures are known in Kwangtung.

I am indebted to Mr. A.O. Barretto for permission to excavate this site, which is located at O.S. 109841 in the garden of his house, 'Girassol,' near the end of a small granodiorite promontory that juts out into Tai Po Hoi.

## *Discovery*

The circle was discovered during the construction of the house in 1953; previously nothing was known either of it or of a nineteenth-century tomb about 50 yds. to the south. When the vegetation was removed, a large mound almost nine ft. high, topped by an enormous granodiorite boulder, was revealed. It is not known whether this feature was artificial. It was dynamited and the rubble used to build the house. Just to the east was found a smaller mound from the centre of which protruded a small boulder (the central menhir). While this smaller mound was being removed to make a lawn, the stone circle was discovered inside. The workmen were instructed to level off the ground but leave the stones *in situ*. The staining of the central menhir shows that the mound originally stood 17 in. above the present ground surface.

When I first saw the site on 15 February 1961, the circle was in the middle of the lawn which in that vicinity was almost completely flat except for a rise of about one and one-half in. around Stone I (Pl. 1a). I excavated the site 17 to 19 March.

## *Excavation*

The site was excavated in four sections (Fig. 1a): A-B-C-D, F-A-D-E, G-H-A-F and H-J-B-A. The excavation was complete except for some of the disturbed area near III and a patch of shrubs near VI. The central menhir and Stones IV and IX were also removed and replaced.

Four strata were observed. The lowest, natural stratum consisted of hard, sandy, red clay containing several weathered boulders. This stratum was clearly disintegrated rock; similar strata are found over a wide area of the colony. Above this on the southeast half of the site was a stratum of greyish-brown clay, very tightly packed and containing lumps of quartz, hae-

matite and some very weathered alluvial stone chips with fossil sea shells, also some relatively fresh chips of granodiorite. Originally it probably extended over the entire site. It undoubtedly represents the original surface layer before the stones were set up and perhaps also the remnants of the mound. Unfortunately, over a large part of the site the upper levels of the greyish-brown clay had been removed (doubtlessly when the lawn was laid out) and replaced by an intrusion consisting of a loosely packed mixture of the first two strata and modern rubbish (brick, asbestos, nails, etc.).

Lastly there was the turf, only about one and one-half in. thick, brought from the bottom of the hill when the lawn was laid out. The relative positions of the strata can be seen from the plan and section (Fig. 1a-b).

### *Stones*

The stones forming the circle all appear to be of granodiorite and therefore must be strictly local—they were probably brought from a radius of a hundred yds., since the hillside is still dotted with very similar boulders. With the possible exception of the central menhir, none was artificially shaped.

The methods of erection of the stones were varied: the central menhir was placed in a pit one ft. one in. square, and nine in. below the top of the natural (11 in. below the present) surface. It was held in place by bedding stone (Pl. Ib). Stones I, VI and VII were natural boulders set in the natural surface. (There were several others on the site but none rose more than an inch above the natural.) It is doubtful whether VI should really be counted as part of the circle: the inner face of VII was concave and it is quite probable that the circle was built to fit it. Stone IX was placed in a pit about four in. below the present surface of the natural stratum, with probably a single bedding stone. Stones V, VIII and X were likely placed in pits: V had at least three bedding stones, whereas VIII and X had none visible. Stone IV was placed so that the bottom, which is flat, was two to four in. above the sloping top of the natural stratum, within the greyish-brown clay. It is possible that the stone was simply placed on the old ground surface and not dug in. Stone II was likewise bedded into the greyish-brown clay (two to six in. above natural), but unlike IV it was held in place by at least four bedding stones. Stone III must have been moved recently, since it now rests on top of the recent intrusion.

### *Finds*

Finds were very meagre:

1. A small fragment of charcoal found about three in. below surface in greyish-brown clay in the northwest quarter of A-B-C-D inside the circle. This was too contaminated by roots and other matter for a carbon test to be feasible. I am most grateful to Miss T.B. Chiu, of the H.K.U. Botany Department, for its identification as a monocot stem, probably palm or bamboo.
2. Two small sea shells directly under stone IV. Mr. A.T. Marshall of the H.K.U. Zoology Department has kindly identified them as an oyster (probably *Ostrea cristagelli*) and a probable scallop (pecten). Both were probably edible.
3. A small chip of green stone from a polished artifact (an axe?) found in greyish-brown clay five in. below surface, nine in. north of E-D and 29 in. west of A-D. Dr. Riley of the H.K.U. Geology Department has kindly identified it as probable serpentine (which occurs locally), but no definite identification could be made without sectioning, and thereby destroying, the object (Pl. IIb).



Plate I *a*. Site before excavation.

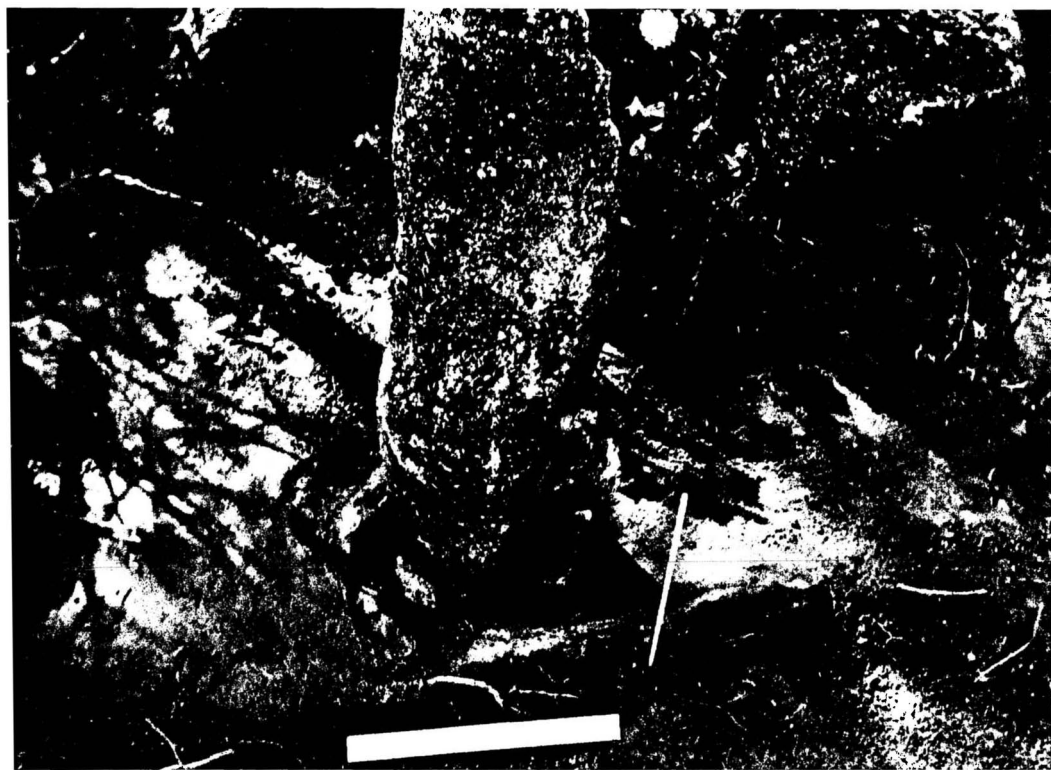


Plate I *b*. Central menhir.

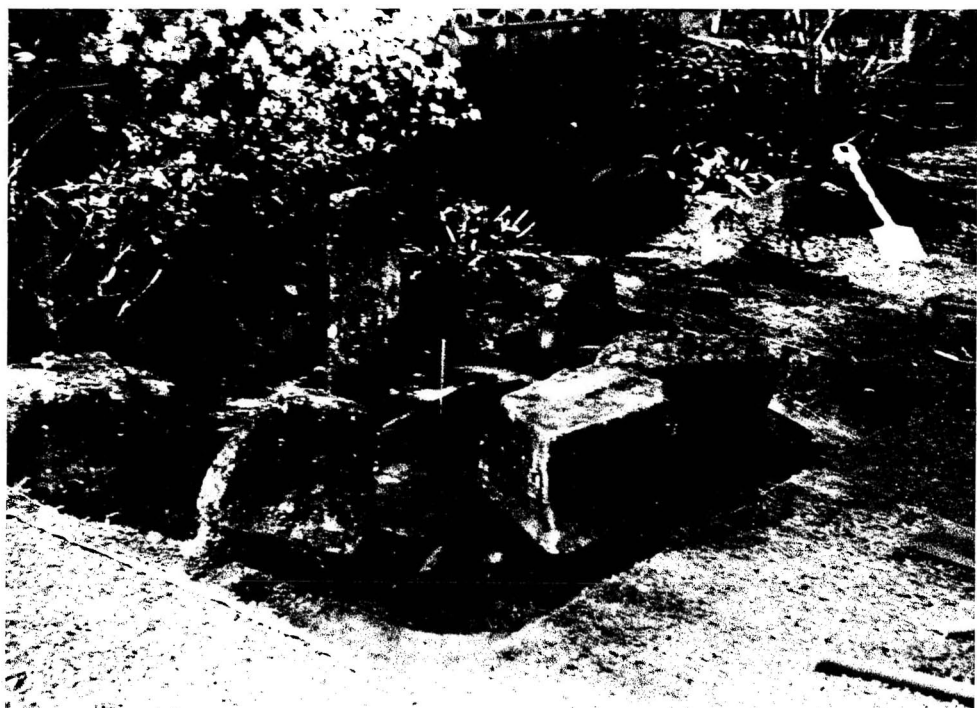
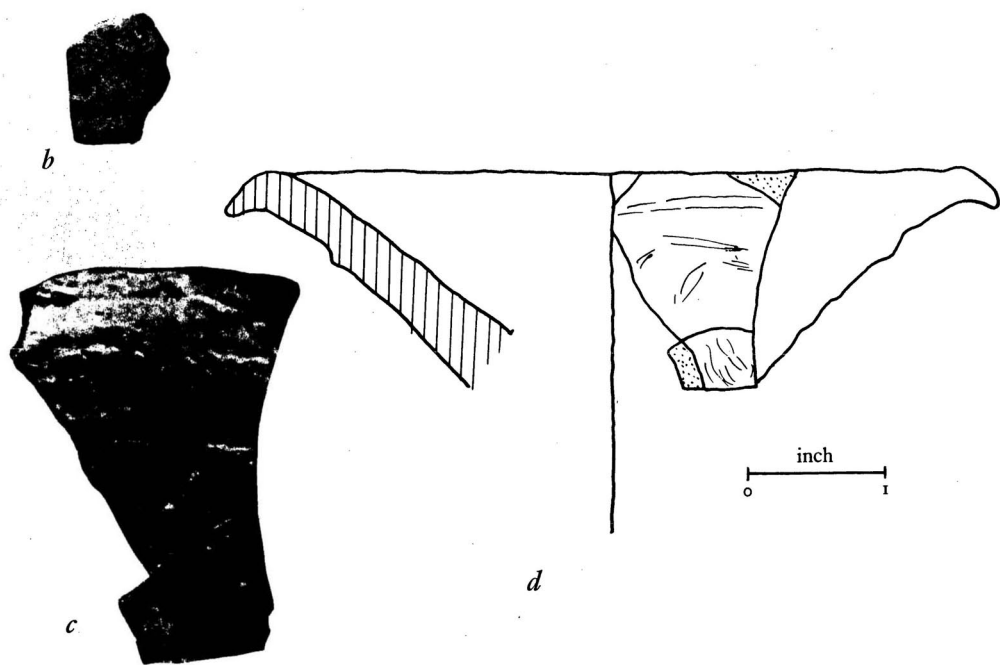


Plate II *a*. Excavated site.



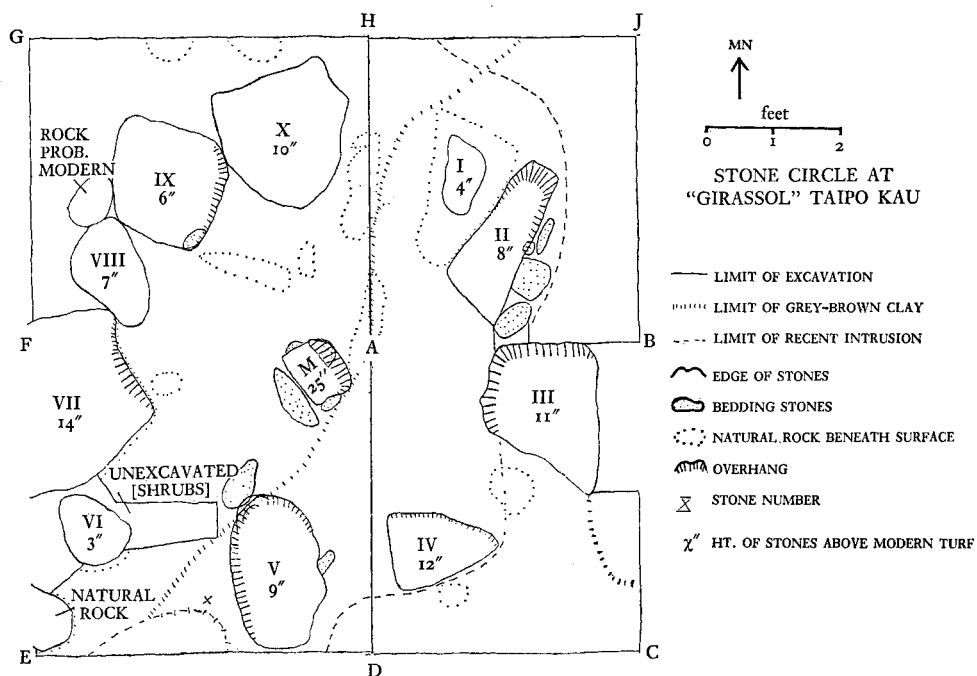


Fig. 1a

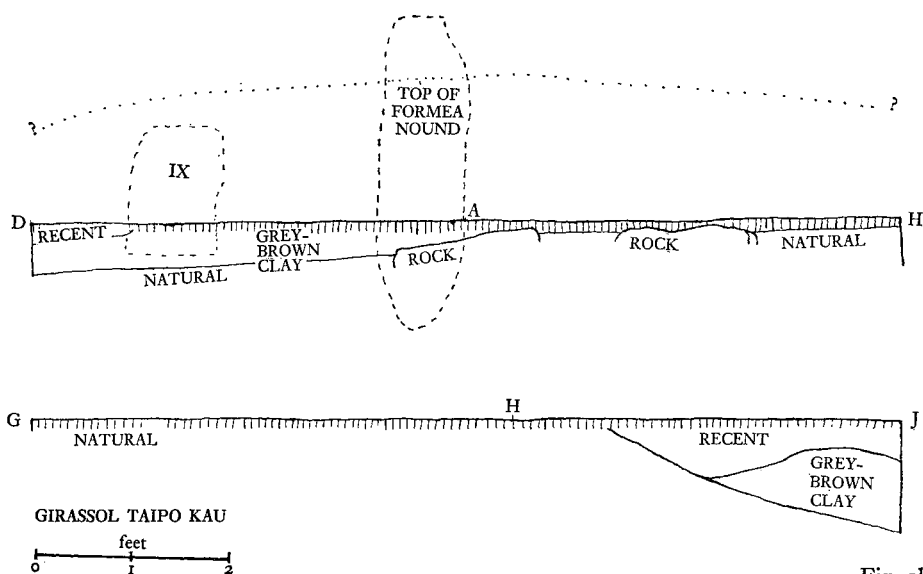


Fig. 1b

4. A sherd of pottery (actually two that fit together) from the recent intrusion in the southeast corner of H-J-B-A (Pl. II *c-d*). The ware is yellowish-brown, sandy, and very hard. One surface is very smooth and either glazed or burnished, and the other is extremely rough, perhaps intentionally rusticated. In Pl. II*d* I have reconstructed it as a shallow bowl, but the edge is very abraded and it may perhaps be a flat tray (the rough surface being on the underside). [Judging from the cross section, without having seen the sherds, an alternative possibility is a large jar with a narrow neck and flaring rim, these sherds being part of the rim—Ed.] The H.K.U. Archaeology Team have been unable to identify or date it. As it was found in the recent intrusion, it does not necessarily have any bearing on the date and culture of the circle itself and it may be recent.

### *Parallels*

Stone circles are known in many parts of the world (e.g. Britain and North Africa). But only those within the China Sea area are likely to be culturally allied. First there is the stone circle at Lo Ah Tsai, Lamma Island, described elsewhere (T.N. Chiu, C.L. So and S.M. Bard, *AP* VIII (1): 148-49).

My knowledge of parallels within Kwangtung is based entirely upon information furnished to me by the Rev. Father Poletti of St. Joseph's Chapel Fan Ling. Many years ago he travelled through a valley no local Chinese dared enter, about ten mi. from Up Sai Pu in Wai Chau County. There he observed traces of old cultivation terraces, foundations of stone buildings and 'two or three' circles of stones with central menhirs. The largest circle had a central menhir over six ft. high. In addition, about two and one-half mi. from Too Tsuen in the same county was a stone circle with central menhir at which joss sticks were still burned. Father Poletti also reported several stone circles in the vicinity of Pin San, although he did not see them himself. The local people said that the stones are thought to contain spirits, and that they are several hundred years old and were built by the Miao. The possibility that the Miao were responsible for at least some of the circles is rendered more likely by the presence of a large menhir in a Miao village in the mountains near Lao Ten Han. Except the one at Lo Ah Tsai, all of the circles described seem to have had a central menhir; but like Lo Ah Tsai they seem not to have been buried. Lastly Father Poletti states that the late Father Maglioni once mentioned having seen similar circles in Hoi Fung.

### *Conclusions*

This circle at Taipo Kau was clearly not intended as a dwelling or a fortification. There can be no doubt that it was a sacred structure of some kind, probably a temple. It could, however, be a grave. The absence of skeletal remains can be explained by the extreme acidity of the soil, in which bones could not survive. (Chemical analysis did not show any appreciable difference between the grey-brown clay inside and outside the circle.) It is also possible that the burial was in the former mound or under one of the stones that were not removed. Another conceivable function (also suggested for Lo Ah Tsai) was that of a meeting place; this seems reasonable, since the flattish tops of the stones could have been used as seats.

Although there is no tangible evidence of the date and culture of the circle, the probability seems high that it is aboriginal rather than Chinese. As such it would have to be of at least mediaeval date; it could well be much older. Until other specimens are excavated, more cannot be said.